

July 7, 2020

The Honorable House Speaker Robert DeLeo
24 Beacon Street, Room 356
Boston, MA 02133

The Honorable House Ways and Means Chair Aaron Michlewitz
24 Beacon Street, Room 243
Boston, MA 02133

To the Honorable Speaker and Chair:

We, the 47 undersigned organizations, ask that you support H.3976, *An Act promoting awareness of sewage pollution in public waters*, and ask for its immediate discharge from House Ways and Means to the House floor with a favorable report.

H.3976 will require public notifications whenever there is a sewage spill in a public waterbody, a requirement that Massachusetts is currently lacking. Every year in Massachusetts, nearly 3 billion gallons of untreated or partially treated sewage is discharged into Massachusetts rivers through combined sewer overflows (CSOs), an infrastructure “shortcut” that contributes significantly to water pollution in our state. The EPA recommends that the public stay away from water contaminated with sewage for 72 hours, and yet we do not provide Massachusetts residents with the information they need to take this simple safety precaution.

As residents currently grapple with COVID-19, many are flocking to the outdoors in unprecedented numbers. In fact, the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention suggests that time outdoors leads to lower risks of COVID-19 transmission. New information from the University of Sterling also suggests that sewage releases may actually serve as a pathway for increased exposure to COVID-19. It is critical that our public spaces remain accessible to all residents during this challenging time in particular, and H.3976 is essential to ensuring that residents can spend time outside on public waterways safely.

For high-risk populations - children, the elderly, pregnant women - engagement with sewage-contaminated water can be disastrous. Sewage carries pathogens - bacteria, parasites, and viruses - as well as chemical toxins. These pathogens can cause infections, dysentery, and potentially even cholera. A 2004 EPA estimate concluded that between 1.8 and 3.5 million Americans become sick annually from recreational contact with sewage-contaminated waters. A 2015 study of Massachusetts hospital admissions published in a journal of the National Institute of Environmental Health Sciences found that ER visits due to gastrointestinal illnesses for elderly patients typically increase by 32% in affected communities after extreme rain events.

H.3976 requires general public notifications after sewage spills, so citizens can make informed decisions about when it is safe to recreate in public waterways. Similar common-sense notification requirements have already been adopted in more than a dozen other states, yet we have failed to make progress on this issue in the Commonwealth. As climate change increases the frequency and intensity of storm events in Massachusetts that exacerbate sewage overflows

(both combined sewer overflows and sanitary sewer overflows), and as the Commonwealth's urban population centers continue to grow, we anticipate that the number and impact of sewage overflow events will only grow. We ask that you support this legislation and efforts to increase funding for communities to implement notification systems and further infrastructure improvements to curtail sewage spills.

This legislation has been several sessions in the making and has broad support throughout the Commonwealth from city, town, and state elected leaders and environmental advocates. Please review the attached letter. On behalf of the citizens we represent and in the interest of protecting the health of all peoples of the Commonwealth, we ask that you act to support the immediate discharge of H.3976 from House Ways and Means.

Sincerely,

Gabby Queenan, Policy Director
Massachusetts Rivers Alliance

Ben Hellerstein, State Director
Environment Massachusetts

Don Keeran, Assistant Director
Association to Preserve Cape Cod

Nancy Goodman, Vice President for Policy
Environmental League of Massachusetts

Linda DiAngelo, President
Back River Watershed Association

Kate Bowditch, President
Essex Country Greenbelt

Jane Winn, Executive Director
Berkshire Environmental Action Team
(BEAT)

Bill Dornbos, Executive Director
Farmington River Watershed Association,
Inc.

Laura Jasinski, Executive Director
Charles River Conservancy

Alice Arena, President
Fore River Residents Against the
Compressor Station

Heather Miller, General Counsel and Policy
Director
Charles River Watershed Association

Paula Goodwin, President
Friends of the Assabet River National
Wildlife Refuge

Keith Davies, Council Coordinator
Chicopee 4Rivers Watershed Council

Judy Lehrer Jacobs, Executive Director
Friends of the Blue Hills

Andrew Fisk, Executive Director
Connecticut River Conservancy

Benjamin Cote, Chairperson
Friends of the Ten Mile and Bucklin Brook

Heather Govern, Vice President and
Director of Clean Air and Water
Conservation Law Foundation

Rui Coelho, President
Greater Boston Chapter of Trout Unlimited

Jim Perry, President
Deerfield River Watershed Association

Marcia Cooper, President
Green Newton

Heather McMann, Executive Director
Groundwork Lawrence

Alison Dixon, Berkshire Outreach Manager
Housatonic Valley Association

Wayne Castonguay, Executive Director
Ipswich River Watershed Association
(IRWA)

Pine duBois, Executive Director
Jones River Watershed Association

Judy Zaunbrecher, Co-President
League of Women Voters of Massachusetts

Jane Calvin, Executive Director
Lowell Parks & Conservation Trust

Mike Cusher, Legislative Director
Mass Audubon

Robb Johnson, Executive Director
Massachusetts Land Trust Coalition

Joe Dorant, President
Massachusetts Organization of State
Engineers and Scientists

Edward Himlan, Executive Director
Massachusetts Watershed Coalition

Matthew Thorne, Executive Director
Merrimack River Watershed Council

Ivan Ussach, Watershed Coordinator
Millers River Watershed Council

Patrick Herron, Executive Director
Mystic River Watershed Association

Emily Molden, Executive Director
Nantucket Land Council

Ian Cooke, Executive Director
Neponset River Watershed Association

Samantha Woods, Executive Director
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Association

Alison Field-Juma, Executive Director
OARS

Peter Severance, Program/Research Director
RiverMerrimack

Kate McPherson, Narragansett Bay
Riverkeeper
Save the Bay

Deb Pasternak, Director
Sierra Club Massachusetts Chapter

Anne Slugg, Chair and Sudbury
Representative
Sudbury, Assabet, and Concord Wild and
Scenic River Stewardship Council

Michael Cavanaugh, President
Sustainable Braintree

Priscilla Chapman, President
Taunton River Watershed Alliance

Emily Myron, Government Relations
Specialist
The Nature Conservancy, Massachusetts
Chapter

Caroline Reeves, Co-Founder
The Muddy Water Initiative

Karen Lachmayr, Chair
Wastewater Advisory Committee (WAC) to
the Massachusetts Water Resources
Authority (MWRA)

Alexandra Dewey, Executive Director
Water Supply Citizens Advisory Committee